

Conflict and Error In The History of Oil

By Louis Reed

The outbreak of the Civil War occurred at a time when western Virginia was experiencing an industrial revolution.¹ The existence of oil at Burning Springs had been known since 1842 when the Rathbone family tried to set up a salt factory and found oil instead. Because oil was worthless, the Rathbones had turned to other pursuits, including farming, timbering, steamboating and storekeeping.²

Between 1842 and 1859 petroleum acquired commercial value through the development of a refining process for kerosene. Some petroleum deposits in western Pennsylvania and western Virginia were already known from the experiences of salt drillers. The opening of the oil field at Titusville, Pennsylvania, in 1859, reminded speculators that oil had also been found in western Virginia, not only at Burning Springs, but also at Malden on the Great Kanawha River³ and near Cisco in Ritchie County. Of these three known deposits only Burning Springs achieved the distinction of becoming an oil field prior to 1861. At the outbreak of the Civil War there were but two producing oil fields in the world, Titusville and Burning Springs.

Contrary to what the State Road marker says, there was no oil activity at Burning Springs in 1859. On February 20, 1860, a speculator named General Samuel D. Karns⁴ leased the "Salt Well"⁵ and one acre of land surrounding it from the Rathbones. He then proceeded to perform what is known in the oil industry as a "cleaning out job," and obtained a settled production of eight to nine barrels a day.⁶

At the same time the Rathbone brothers, Cass and John, drilled a second well at Burning Springs, which produced initially eleven hundred barrels a day. It was this second well and not the first that precipitated the legendary Burning Springs Oil Rush.⁷

¹ See "Colonel Rathbone of Burning Springs," *West Virginia History*, April 1962, p. 206-7.

² They also established a post office called Burning Spring in 1849. *Records*, U. S. Post Office Department.

³ There never was any sizable production of oil at Malden, but the salt drillers there found an abundance of natural gas. Oil is still produced near Cisco.

⁴ The legends about this man are fantastic.

⁵ It is called the "Salt Well" in the lease, *Records*, Wirt County Court, DB 2, p. 511. This is the first oil lease ever executed south of the Mason and Dixon Line. In making this statement, I have defined an oil lease as a right to explore and have excluded salt lease where oil may have been discovered by accident and also the oil pits, dug by hand, by the residents of Sumner Oil.

⁶ Statement of Louis Roberts Sr. made to the author in 1936. At that time Louis Roberts, an aged man, was the joint owner with his brother, James, of the whole of the original Burning Springs oil field. Roberts knew Karns, but they belonged to different generations. It must be remembered that this well had been abandoned for nearly eighteen years.

⁷ Statement of Louis Roberts. The well settled to about one hundred barrels per day.

In 1860 and 1861 the Rathbones surveyed their entire 600 acres at Burning Springs into one acre parcels, and offered to lease one acre to all comers for a royalty of the production.⁸ The policy of the Rathbones in sharing their profits with all who would take a chance and drill a well contributed to the oil rush. The same policy contributed to waste and overdrilling. The earliest operators knew nothing of geology or conservation practices. They had to learn the hard way that oil wells ultimately run dry.⁹ They drilled their wells as closely together as was possible on their one-acre tracts in the belief that oil was like underground water which replenishes itself.

The rush had been on for approximately one year when Fort Sumter was fired on in the spring of 1861. In the meantime scores of wells had been completed,¹⁰ and Burning Springs had acquired the aspect of a small city. The production of oil brought in other industries such as sawmills, stave mills, boat-building yards, and barrel factories. There was a prime need for housing and 1861 saw the completion of the famed Chicago House, a hotel reputed to be the finest in western Virginia.¹¹

There are no census records on the first town of Burning Springs. In 1860 the place was a farm; in 1870 the population was 1368. State and local histories have uniformly placed the population of Burning Springs at 6000 in the spring of 1861.¹² Legend and the recollections of older people, magnified by time, give the town a population of ten to fifteen thousand at its peak. It is known that many professional men migrated to Burning Springs¹³ and that the Rathbones established a private bank there.¹⁴

Because of war shortages and transportation priorities, some odd technical and mechanical expedients became necessary at Burning Springs. Oil barrels were manufactured on the spot; there was fortunately a bountiful supply of virgin timber. Casing pipe and gathering lines for oil and gas had frequently to be hollowed out

⁸ Statement of Louis Roberts confirmed by leases recorded in Wirt County Clerk's Office. Some of these leases provide for a one-third royalty to the Rathbones, but later leases provide for a one-eighth royalty. The one-eighth royalty became standard in the industry, so that today royalty interests are commonly called "the farmer's eighth."

⁹ Louis Roberts.

¹⁰ The oil pay at Burning Springs was approximately 300 feet below the surface. Many steam engines had been imported. Even with a spring pole drilling outfit operated by hand (and there were some of these), a well could be drilled to the pay, with great labor and good fortune, in a month to six weeks time. Louis Roberts. Prior to February 1861, Lewis Stone had drilled nine additional wells on one acre. Wirt County Clerk's Office, Vol. 2, p. 185.

¹¹ There were two Chicago Houses at Burning Springs, but the second could not compete with the first in its appointments. The first Chicago House was destroyed by unknown means in 1862; the second was consumed by fire in the middle 1870's (exact date unknown). Document of Robert Lee taken in 1870. Lee could not remember the first Chicago House, but he claimed to have been a spectator at the destruction of the second.

¹² The figure of 6000 for the population of Burning Springs in 1861 is supposed to be correct as it was taken and by whom it was taken.

¹³ Among the persons were John E. Jackson, W. L. Jackson, a Confederate General, rising engineer, and later a United States Senator; and J. M. Crumley, who became a railroad and engineer, representing Miss, Callahan, and Colonel Crumley, in the Restored Government of Virginia at Winchester.

¹⁴ John A. Williamson was later one of the founders and the President of Union Trust and Deposit Company of Frederickburg.

of wood. Lacking manila rope, the drilling line was comprised of hickory poles of equal length with a hook at one end and an eye at the other. On each drilling crew a scaffold man was stationed high in the derrick to hook and unhook the poles as the tools were raised and lowered in the hole.¹⁵

After the war began, Wirt County, in common with all of western Virginia, was the scene of confusion and turmoil. The Judge of the Circuit Court, Gideon D. Camden, was an avowed Secessionist. The records show that he was on the bench at Elizabeth on April 14, 1861, and that he conducted court for more than a week thereafter. Apparently, the Restored Government of Virginia appointed Arthur I. Boreman of Parkersburg in Judge Camden's place, though there is nothing in the records at Elizabeth to show how Boreman became Judge.¹⁶ From 1861 to 1863 no regular terms of court were held, but Judge Boreman held court for two days in 1862.¹⁷ The paucity of leases recorded in the County Clerk's Office from 1861 to 1863 reflect the confusions and uncertainties of the times. Though Burning Springs was still booming, leases and deeds either were not submitted for record or someone failed to record them. An important deed, to which reference will be made hereafter, was not admitted to record until sixteen years after the war ended.¹⁸

Many of the early oil operators at Burning Springs came from Pennsylvania¹⁹ and were naturally sympathetic to the northern cause. This was also true of many of the local operators, regardless of political affiliation, though there was no unanimity among them. Some declared for the North and some for the South. Among those who went for the North were the Rathbone brothers, and those redoubtable cousins of Stonewall Jackson, John Jay Jackson and James Monroe Jackson.²⁰

As soon as hostilities began Cass Rathbone, a staunch Unionist, organized his own private army consisting of a troop of cavalry and two infantry companies known locally as the Burning Springs Home Guards. In the fall of 1861 the Home Guards were inducted into Federal Service. The Burning Springs Home Guards were absorbed into the 11th Virginia Volunteers (Federal), and Rathbone was commissioned Lieutenant Colonel and made commanding officer

¹⁵ I am indebted to my grandfather, Amaziah Reed, for this information. He worked briefly as a scaffold man at Burning Springs.

¹⁶ Arthur I. Boreman, after serving as the first Governor of West Virginia, was elected Judge of the Circuit Courts of Wood and Wirt Counties in 1888 and served as such until his death in 1896.

¹⁷ Records, Clerk of the Circuit Court, Wirt County.

¹⁸ Records, County Clerk's Office, Wirt County.

¹⁹ Among these were General Kaine, John P. Clarke, and Colonel David Roberts. Of Clarke, more later. Colonel David Roberts, the father of Louis Roberts, had been Mayor of Chester, Pennsylvania. Mr. Glen W. Roberts of Elizabeth, West Virginia, now owns the official seal of David Roberts, Mayor of Chester.

²⁰ It is a curious circumstance that no biography of Stonewall Jackson, that has come to my attention, even mentions these cousins. John J. Jackson was appointed to the Federal Academy by Abraham Lincoln. James M. Jackson served for many years after the war as Circuit Judge of Wood and Wirt Counties. He was the great grandfather of Preston Jackson Rathbone, President of the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey in 1902.

of the regiment.²¹ In July, 1861, for reasons as yet undiscovered, the name of the Burning Springs Post Office was changed to Rathbone. The Post Office remained Rathbone till 1869 when it was changed back to Burning Springs. This change of name, though it appears not to have met with general approbation, tends to compound the mystery of Burning Springs. Locally, the town has always been Burning Springs; officially during the Civil War it was Rathbone; General Jones in his report called it Oiltown.²² Since the town itself has disappeared, all this contradictory nomenclature has magnified the fabulous and legendary aspects of Burning Springs.

Late in 1861 the 11th Virginia Volunteers was ordered out of Burning Springs to chase bushwhackers in adjoining Calhoun and Roane Counties. The regiment rounded up a number of rebels, including the notorious Dan Duskey who had robbed the Ripley Post Office and was ultimately pardoned by Abraham Lincoln,²³ but there was little organized fighting. A number of people were killed on both sides in skirmishes and ambushes. On September 2, 1862, Colonel J. C. Rathbone surrendered the remnants of the 11th Virginia Volunteers to Confederate General Albert G. Jenkins at Spencer Court House in Roane County. He and Major George C. Trimble were dismissed from the service by Secretary of War Stanton for cowardly conduct on January 6, 1863, without a court martial and apparently without the knowledge or the presence of Major Trimble.²⁴

On May 9, 1863, the town and the oil field of Burning Springs were completely destroyed by Confederate cavalry detachment under the command of General William E. Jones. Jones' report, which was published in the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, describes the burning of a place called Oiltown, on the Little Kanawha River, and claims that he destroyed 150,000 barrels of oil.²⁵ Oiltown, Rathbone and Burning Springs were all the same place as has been shown in this and former papers.

On the day that Burning Springs was destroyed the delegates to the State Convention, which had been convened to choose the new State officials, were in sessions at Parkersburg, about twenty airline miles from Burning Springs. There was a telegraph office at Parkersburg used by the military and by newspaper correspondents covering the Convention. Though the great fire at Burning Springs was

²¹ See "Colonial Birthplace of Burning Springs," *ibid.*

²² It is worth noting that I first learned of the change of name to Rathbone in 1901 when the Post Office Department, at my request, sent me two lists of the Burning Springs postmasters. I had unquestioned access of witnesses and personal knowledge of the town without suspecting that Burning Springs had ever been anything other than Burning Springs.

²³ See the *Memoria, Ohio, Times* for December 30, 1861. Curiously enough, Dan Duskey was apprehended for a felony (specification) in 1864, and returned on bond by Judge George Loomis of the West Virginia Circuit Court, the prisoner not to have been sent. See also *West Virginia Circuit Court's Office*.

²⁴ See "Colonial Birthplace of Burning Springs," *West Virginia History*, April, 1962.

²⁵ See "The Legacy of Major George C. Trimble," *West Virginia History*, July, 1962. It is worthy for the record that the father, Colonel David Rathbone and other officers estimated the loss at 150,000 barrels instead of 150,000 barrels.

plainly visible after nightfall to the delegates, the reporters, the personnel of the Army and Navy (gunboats), the inhabitants of Parkersburg and the larger part of the population of the oil field,²⁶ the fire itself was not reported in the newspapers at the time, and, what is even more remarkable, no government report, military or otherwise, concerning it has been found in the Archives of the United States.²⁷ For some reason, probably ascribed to military security, the public was told only that the raiders had destroyed *the* oil well on the Little Kanawha River,²⁸ as if there was only one well instead of hundreds. Nothing whatever was said in the press about the destruction of \$1,500,000 worth of oil, \$40,000,000 worth of equipment, and a town larger than Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. Nor has this oversight been explained since the war. The American public does not yet know that the Confederates destroyed one of the world's two oil fields in 1863.

On June 20, 1863, West Virginia was formally admitted into the Union as a separate state. That same fall a man named C. H. Shattuck, whose qualifications are unknown, made a report to the Commissioner of Agriculture, Washington, D. C., in which he is said to have estimated the annual oil production from the Burning Springs Oil Field for the years 1861, 1862 and 1863 as follows:²⁹ 1861, 4,000,000 gallons; 1862, 3,200,000 gallons; 1863, 2,000,000 gallons.

If these figures are anywise correct, and they are the only figures available, we have a conflict in evidence here of monumental proportions. General Jones reported that he destroyed 150,000 barrels which adds up to 4,735,000 gallons; the operators estimated their loss at 300,000 barrels or 9,470,000 gallons. Since the Little Kanawha River was unnavigable in dry weather, we may reasonably suppose that every effort had been made to ship oil prior to May 9, 1863. The presence of 300,000 barrels (or even of 150,000 barrels) at Burning Springs on that day is indicative of a normal daily inventory of that amount, and the inventory cannot be reconciled, by any logical standard, with the *single* oil well reported as destroyed in the press or with Shattuck's production figures. With respect to the latter, a reasonable explanation suggests itself. Commercial crude oil has always been measured in barrels.³⁰ Shattuck's report was made to the Commissioner of Agriculture, to whom oil terminology was possibly unfamiliar, and someone (let us generously exonerate Shattuck) changed barrels to the more familiar agricultural gallons. If this is what happened Shattuck's figures would read as follows: 1861, 126,000,000 gallons; 1862, 100,800,000 gallons; 1863, 63,000,000 gallons.

These figures have an appearance of authenticity because pro-

²⁶ This circumstance is related in V. A. Lewis' *History of West Virginia*, attested by contemporaries, and confirmed in legend.

²⁷ There must be errors somewhere. Possibly, those who have searched, including myself, have been turning in the wrong wrong loop.

²⁸ *Washington Intelligence* for May 14, 1863, under a New York dateline.

²⁹ This report comes to me uncorroborated from a book called *The Oil Well Driller* by Charles A. Whitcomb, published in 1902.

³⁰ A barrel more or less was constituted at Burning Springs in 1860 by John F. Clarke. Louis Kossow.

dution would probably be curtailed in 1862 (due to Jenkins' Raid and the unsettled condition of the country) and renewed activity in 1863 was interrupted after four months by the destruction of the oil field.

Other tangible evidence tends to support the claim of Burning Springs as a large industrial complex. In 1881 an old deed, executed in 1865, from William Welsh and others to Wirt Oil and Mining Company and John P. Clarke was admitted to record in Wirt County.³¹ This deed conveyed a one-third part of a two-acre oil lease and an undeveloped farm³² for a stated consideration of three hundred thousand dollars (\$300,000.00).³³

Again, in the year 1961, Mr. Harvey J. Simmons, of Charleston, West Virginia, Manager of the Appalachian Division of Cabot Corporation, made a serious attempt to locate the well, drilled by the Rathbones in 1861, that initiated the oil rush. His purpose was to recommend a marker to the Centennial Commission. The supposed site of this well is now covered with underbrush of jungle-like proportions. After great exertion, Mr. Simmons reported that the exact site of the well could not be established because he had found four abandoned oil holes, any one of which could have been the original.³⁴

The failure of the press and the War Department to list Burning Springs among the casualties of the war, the confusion of names resulting from the indiscriminate use of Burning Springs, Rathbone and Oiltown, the press report of a single oil well destroyed by Jones' Raiders, the absence of census returns, the utter destruction of the town and the oil field and their subsequent abandonment and desolation,³⁵ the curious circumstance that the oil rushes never produced a poet or an adequate historian, the hazards and uncertainties attendant on a theater of war, the injustice inflicted by the War Department on Colonel Rathbone and Major Trimble, the inexplicable silence of the victims, the misleading production figures, and the lethargy and disinterestedness of scholars have conspired to deprive Burning Springs of any role whatsoever in the great Civil War.³⁶

Yet, Burning Springs, through changing values, has finally achieved a distinction that was unforeseen in the heat of the conflict. In spite of the conflict in evidence, the neglect of historians, and the mystery that still surrounds its name, two indisputable facts about Burning Springs have now emerged: (1) Burning Springs was the most important industrial complex in enemy hands destroyed by the Confederates in the course of the War, and (2) Burning Springs is the first military oil objective in the history of warfare.

³¹ Records, Wirt County Court, DB 16, p. 81.

³² The farm never produced a drop of oil.

³³ If Shurtz's figure was right, the entire production of the Burning Springs Oil Field in 1861 would have had a market value of approximately \$300,000.00.

³⁴ This statement confirmed by telephone, March 7, 1963. Mr. Simmons' report undermined the position of those who held that the destruction of the oil field was not reported to the War Department because the field was inconsequential.

³⁵ After the War, the land was neglected, and Burning Springs was partially rebuilt. One of the results of the War, however, was the introduction of salt water into the oil wells. (Lamb, *History of West Virginia*). Today the old field is practically a jungle.

³⁶ Neither Burning Springs nor Rathbone is mentioned in the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*. The *Biograph of General Jones* is indexed under Oiltown.